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Levi Calls Cointelpro 'Foolish'

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By Lawrence Meyer
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Attorney General Edward H. Levi said yesterday that the counterintelligence program the FBI operated from 1956 to 1971 was "foolish" and "outrageous."

Levi, holding his second press conference since becoming Attorney General Feb. 7, gave his first public characterization of the FBI's "Cointelpro" effort to harass and disrupt left and right-wing groups.

Levi's comments followed the release by the Justice Department last Friday of information about five Cointelpro programs, including one code-named "Operation Hoodwink," in which FBI agents sent anonymous letters to organized crime figures and Communist Party officials in an attempt to put them "in competition" with each other.

Directing his comments to all 12 Cointelpro programs that have been made public, including seven disclosed last November, Levi said, "I think all of them were foolish and some were outrageous."

Later in the press conference, Levi said, "I think they were foolish because I think the sending of anonymous letters, false letters, trying to get the organized crime people angry at the Communists doesn't work very well, and therefore it's foolish."

"I think it's outrageous because I think there's enough dishonesty and lack of candor and incivility in our society as it is and I don't think a government agency should add to that."

Levi added that his relationship with the FBI now is "quite close" and one of "confidence."

Although he said he is "not completely satisfied" with the Drug Enforcement Administration, Levi denied rumors that he plans to abolish the agency or move it out of the Justice Department.

He indicated, however, that he was reviewing the position of John Bartels, the current DEA director.

"I think it has to be realized that a new Attorney General, even though he's been in office four months, and a newer deputy attorney general quite naturally are reviewing the positions of persons such as Mr. Bartels," Levi said.

Levi already has ordered an investigation of DEA, which has been in turmoil since its creation two years ago, to review the operation of that agency. Bartels has been the center of controversy for several months, facing opposition from both within DEA and from Congress, where the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations has been conducting an inquiry into charges of DEA mismanagement.

On another subject, Levi said he hopes "very soon" to

issue a statement on the number of warrantless electronic surveillances being conducted by government agencies.

Levi said that he had an understanding with Central Intelligence Agency Director William E. Colby that when the CIA conducts an electronic surveillance of an American abroad, it will not be done without authorization from the Attorney General. Levi declined to say how frequently such surveillances are conducted, although in one response he indicated the number is "miniscule."

The Attorney General indicated he may cut back the operations of some of the Justice Department's 17 strike forces—interagency teams of attorneys and investigators that attack organized crime in various sections of the country.

"Strike forces, in my judgment, work very well in some areas, and not as well in others," he said. "We should try to find those areas where they do work well and others where they don't."